
Texas Department of Health

The Commissioner's Report to the Board of Health

February 26, 2003

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Hot Topics



Budget presentations made at Capitol

Commissioner Sanchez, accompanied by some members the TDH executive team and Board of Health chair George McCleskey and member Mary Ceverha, appeared last week at the Capitol to address the department’s budget for fiscal years 2004 and 2005. He testified before the state’s House Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services on Feb. 19 and, on Monday this week, before the state’s Senate Finance Committee. Transcripts of testimony is available at the TDH website. The commissioner has kept staff informed through regular e-mails. *For more information, contact Jayne Nussbaum, Office of Governmental Relations, at (512) 458-7263 or e-mail marsha.canright@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Smallpox vaccinations start in Texas as preparation for possible bioterrorism

To prepare for the possibility of an attack by an enemy using smallpox as a biological weapon, the first phase of smallpox vaccinations has begun in Texas. At a TDH press conference hosted by Commissioner Sanchez on Feb.18, state epidemiologist Dennis Perrotta was vaccinated before the reporters and TV cameras. “It didn’t hurt at all,” he said. That evening, coverage of the press conference was the lead story on all TV stations in the Texas capital and throughout the state. Phase I calls for the vaccination of health-care professionals who would be most likely to be called on to investigate and control a smallpox outbreak, as well as the vaccination of certain hospital personnel who would diagnose and treat smallpox cases. Training and vaccination of local and regional vaccinators and public health response teams is under way. Hospital response teams will also be vaccinated as part of this effort. *For more information, contact Dennis Perrotta, Office of the State Epidemiologist, at (512) 458-7219 or e-mail dennis.perrotta@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Federal funds to be used to serve children in urgent need of medical care

TDH will begin using a projected surplus of federal money to pay for urgently needed medical services for about 150 children who have been on a waiting list for the Children with Special Health-Care Needs Program. The waiting list, which contains about 1,400 names, was created in October 2001 after expense projections indicated that the \$40 million-a-year program would run out of money. Expense projections done after the waiting list had been in effect for several months indicated a surplus of funds. The 150 selected children are those currently on the waiting list who have no other comprehensive health-care coverage and who are in urgent need of health-care services as indicated by statements from physicians. TDH will begin notifying their families this week. TDH has

been working with legislative and other state government leaders on how to use the projected federal funds surplus. The decision to begin serving those most in need of medical care was reached late Monday. *For more information, contact Doug McBride, Office of Communications, at (512) 458-7524 or e-mail doug.mcbride@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Executive deputy commissioner accepts new position at HHSC

At the end of this month, Charles Bell, M.D., executive deputy commissioner at TDH, will end more than a dozen years of effective leadership at our agency. Dr. Bell starts March 1 in a new position at the Health and Human Services Commission, where he'll serve as its deputy commissioner for health. Dr. Bell, a native of Port Arthur and a graduate of Southwestern Medical School in Dallas, joined TDH in 1990 as chief of the Bureau of HIV/STD Prevention, then directed Public Health Region 1, and in February 2000 became the agency's executive deputy commissioner. In that capacity, he served for a full year, from November 2000 to October 2001, as the interim commissioner and state health officer. TDH staff, who respect Dr. Bell's reasonableness, compassion, and vision, will miss him, but, in his new position, he'll continue his good works for the health of Texans. *For more information, contact Marsha Canright, Office of Communications, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-3201, or e-mail marsha.canright@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Bureau of Vital Statistics quickly issues death certificates for Columbia crew

The Bureau of Vital Statistics aided the prompt completion of death certificates for the seven astronauts who died in the shuttle crash on Feb. 1. The bureau worked closely with the Angelina County Clerk's Office in Lufkin and the Armed Forces Medical Examiner working out of Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, La., to register the astronauts' deaths. Death registration can typically take up to 40 days to accomplish, but the astronauts' deaths were registered within three days. *For more information, contact Debra Owens, Bureau of Vital Statistics, at (512) 458-7366 or e-mail debra.owens@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Bi-national system to improve TB referrals, case management

The start of the Bi-national TB Card Pilot Project will be kicked off during a World TB Day event on March 27 in El Paso. The project establishes a comprehensive bi-national system between the United States and Mexico for tuberculosis referrals and case management. Surveillance data for 2001 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that almost a quarter of all U.S. foreign-born TB patients are from Mexico. The system consists of six sites, four in Mexico and two on the U.S.-Mexico border. One of the two border sites consists of the three cities of El Paso, Las Cruces in New Mexico, and Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua. *For more information, contact Dr. Charles Wallace, TB Elimination Program, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-2291, or e-mail charles.wallace@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Region 6/5S assists in recovery of space shuttle Columbia

When the space shuttle Columbia broke up over Texas on Feb. 1, the Region 6/5S Radiation Program dispatched an environmental specialist, Herbert Dushane, to the Lufkin Civic Center to lend technical expertise and support in case a device containing radioactive material was found among the shuttle debris. The request for assistance was made by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. Mr. Dushane met with representatives from that agency and from the federal Environmental Protection Agency

and the Civil Support Team. No radioactive contamination was evident from shuttle debris. All of the radioactive materials appearing on an inventory list of possible materials aboard the shuttle, supplied by NASA, would not pose a health threat to the civilian population. *For more information, contact David Smith, Radiation Program, at (713) 767-3252 or e-mail davida.smith@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Disease Outbreaks and Investigations



Year's first pertussis death occurs in Hunt County

A 2-year-old girl with pertussis died in February in Hunt County; hers was the first pertussis fatality reported for 2003. She had not been vaccinated for pertussis. She was admitted to the hospital nine days after cough onset and died nine days later. A specimen collected on the day of admission was PCR-positive for *Bordetella pertussis*. She was treated with azithromycin upon hospitalization, switched to erythromycin three days later, and began clarithromycin the next day. *For more information, contact David Bastis, Bureau of Immunization and Pharmacy Support, at (512) 458-7284 or e-mail david.bastis@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Influenza widespread across state

The current level of flu activity in Texas, as reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is at its highest: "widespread, level 3." Types A and B of influenza have been identified in Harris Bell counties. Type A alone has been identified in Travis, Brazos, and McLennan counties. Reports of increased absenteeism in schools because of flu-like illnesses have been received from Castro, Colorado, Comal, and Galveston counties. The majority of flu isolates continue to be Flu A/New Caledonia/20/99 (H1N1)-like and Flu B/Hong Kong/330/2001-like, both well matched for this year's vaccine. Influenza B/Sichuan/379/99-like has been isolated from a specimen collected Jan. 14 from a 22-year-old in Lubbock County; this strain of Type B influenza is not included in this season's flu vaccine. The CDC encourages continuing vaccination efforts throughout the season, which ends in May, especially among health-care workers, persons at high risk for serious complications from influenza, and contacts of these high-risk persons. *For more information, contact Neil Pascoe, Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance Division, at (512) 458-7676 or e-mail neil.pascoe@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Thousands vaccinated against meningococcal disease after child's death

A mass vaccination of 3,474 people against meningococcal disease was held Jan. 15-16 in Cleveland, where TDH had confirmed three cases of meningococcal illness in children since late October. One of the children died. Vaccinations were given to 2- to 19-year-olds living within in the Cleveland Independent School District's boundaries. Another 50 were vaccinated in a make-up clinic a week later. The vaccination effort involved 75 workers: community volunteers and employees from Region 6/5S, Region 4/5N, the TDH central office, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A call team consisting of 30 Region 6/5S employees staffed phones to answer the many calls from concerned citizens that poured into the regional office. *For more information, contact Brian Rutherford, Public Health Preparedness, at (713) 767-3010 or e-mail brian.rutherford@tdh.state.tx.us.*



3 outbreaks of digestive disturbances under investigation

Staff from the TDH Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance Division are consulting with three local health departments investigating the following outbreaks:

- A gastrointestinal illness that hit 29 of 37 conference participants at a Dallas hotel. The 29, residents of various Texas counties, all developed gastroenteritis within a day or two of the end of the conference. To date, there are no positive laboratory findings, and there is no evidence that any other guests who stayed at the same hotel during the same time frame have become ill.
- An ongoing outbreak of shigellosis in Wichita Falls that began about two months ago. To date, 67 cases have been laboratory-confirmed. The local health department has distributed advisories, a press release, and other materials on prevention and control for a second time.
- An outbreak of gastroenteritis that affected 28 of 51 residents, plus three staff members, at an Austin nursing home in January. Norwalk virus has been identified as the cause. Four stool specimens obtained from ill residents were submitted to TDH for testing. *For more information, contact Linda Gaul, Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance Division, at (512) 458-7676 or e-mail linda.gaul@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Number of rabies cases jumps in Region 7

In 2002, Region 7 investigated 271 cases of rabid animals, compared to 175 in 2001 and 172 in 2000. Cases were caused by the skunk and bat rabies strains. In addition to the strains' infecting skunks and bats, these rabies strains were also confirmed in dogs, cats, raccoons, cattle, foxes, goats, and a wolf hybrid. McLennan County had the highest number of cases (32), followed by Washington (28), Travis (25), Coryell (23), and Fayette (21) counties. Compare Washington County's 28 cases with the 21 it had in 2001, when it was the county with the highest number of cases in the state. To promote rabies awareness and prevention, Region 7 Zoonosis Control staff share rabies data and prevention information electronically each month with animal-control agencies, veterinarians, law-enforcement agencies, government councils, local health department personnel, local health authorities, county extension offices, state and federal park managers, state and federal animal-related government agencies, and infection-control practitioners. *For more information, contact Beverlee E. Nix, Region 7 Zoonosis Control, at (254) 778-6744, ext. 2451, or e-mail beverlee.nix@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Final determination pending in Barton Springs health-risks investigation

In response to recent articles in the *Austin American-Statesman*, Austin city officials have asked TDH to assist them in evaluating potential health risks to humans from the reported pollution in Barton Springs Pool. John Villanacci, Ph.D., and the TDH Environmental Epidemiology and Toxicology staff have been working with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the federal Environmental Protection Agency, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to fulfill the request. A preliminary analysis of available data indicated no identifiable pollution-related human health risks associated with swimming in the pool. At a recent Austin City Council work session, Dr. Villanacci and staffer Richard Beauchamp, M.D., presented the preliminary results of the investigation, as did representatives from the above agencies and from the U.S. Geological Survey, M.D. Anderson Cancer Research Center, Texas A&M University,

and the University of Texas at Austin. At that session, the agencies. Dr. Villanacci and staff consider the results preliminary because they are awaiting sample results for other contaminants and believe that it is necessary to review those results before making a final determination. *For more information, contact Dr. John Villanacci, Epidemiology Division, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-6175, or e-mail john.villanacci@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Stolen prescription drugs, piercing of minors both being investigated

The Drugs and Medical Devices Division is involved with the following two investigations:

- working with the Food and Drug Administration's Office of Criminal Investigations regarding the diversion of stolen prescription drugs in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.
- working with the New Braunfels Police Department in a criminal investigation of a body-piercing studio that is allegedly piercing minors. *For more information, contact John L. Gower, Drugs and Cosmetics, at (512) 719-0237, ext. 464, or e-mail john.gower@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Health Steps, Title V seeing anemia, diabetes, high lead levels in January clients

The Clinical Chemistry Branch reported the following abnormal laboratory test results for January 2003 to Texas Health Steps and Title V medical providers:

- 439 children's specimens had blood-lead levels greater than or equal to 10 µg/dL, indicating possible lead poisoning, and eight children had more blood lead than the medically critical value of 40 µg/dL.
- 1,264 children's specimens had total hemoglobin levels of less than 11 g/dL, indicating possible anemia, and three children had less total hemoglobin than the medically critical value of 7 g/dL.
- Nine children had clinically significant hemoglobinopathies.
- Five medical providers were called with possible elevated Hb A1c (glycated hemoglobin) results; five patients were known diabetics.
- 78 children had serum cholesterol levels greater than or equal to 200 mg/dL, indicating possible hyperlipidemia.
- One patient's specimen was confirmed positive for syphilis. *For more information, contact Eldridge T. Hutcheson, Biochemistry and Genetics Division, at (512) 458-7430 or e-mail eldridge.hutcheson@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Blood-lead levels in state-mandated tests reported

The Clinical Chemistry Branch reported 43 non-Medicaid, non-Title V patients' specimens with blood-lead levels greater than or equal to 10 µg/dL, indicating possible lead poisoning. Two children had a blood-lead level greater than or equal to the medically critical value of 40 µg/dL, and 28 patients' specimens had total hemoglobin levels of less than 11 g/dL, indicating possible anemia. Test results were reported to the specimen submitter and to Teresa Willis, TDH blood-lead case manager. *For more information, contact Eldridge T. Hutcheson, Biochemistry and Genetics Division, at (512) 458-7430 or e-mail eldridge.hutcheson@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Conferences, Work Groups, and Trainings



Lab heads meet to discuss chemical terrorism

Susan Neill, bureau chief of the TDH Bureau of Laboratories, and Dwight Schaeper, director of the Environmental Sciences Division, attended a workshop Jan. 6-8 in Atlanta, Ga., on preparedness for chemical terrorism. The workshop was held by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Association of Public Health Laboratories. Representatives of various states' public health laboratories met with their federal partners to discuss and plan laboratory issues related to incidents of chemical terrorism. *For more information, contact Dwight Schaeper, Environmental Sciences Division, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-2429, or e-mail dwight.schaeper@tdh.state.tx.us.*



DOT, Toxicity, and Monitoring Conference hosted by Region 6/5S TB staff

The Tuberculosis Elimination Program at Region 6/5S hosted the Directly Observed Therapy (DOT), Toxicity, and Monitoring Conference, held Jan. 28-29 at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. The conference covered the four essential elements of DOT:

- List the anti-tuberculosis medications used for the treatment of tuberculosis.
- Describe the adverse side effects of the medications.
- Explain how monitoring is done to identify and prevent drug-related toxicity.
- Demonstrate the ability to develop rapport and ask open-ended questions, and discuss how to increase personal safety in the field.

There were 50-plus representatives in attendance at the conference from state, county, city, and local health departments, as well as representatives from local community-based organizations. *For more information, contact Aftab Hashim, Region 6/5S Disease Control and Prevention, at (713) 767-3023 or e-mail aftab.hashim@tdh.state.tx.us.*



West Nile conference designed to inform public health professionals

The Zoonosis Control Division received federal funds to promote West Nile virus infrastructure at the local level. In partnership with the Texas Public Health Training Center, a consortium of three Texas schools of public health, the division is using these funds to host identical two-day training conferences on the West Nile virus. These trainings will be held in Fort Worth (March 20-21), Odessa (March 27-28), San Antonio (March 31-April 1), and Houston (April 3-4). The conference program is designed to provide local public health professionals with the latest information on West Nile virus in Texas, including the history of the virus, epidemiology, disease aspects, vector and virus surveillance, and mosquito control. The agenda also includes presentations on public-information strategies and legal issues as well as a hands-on demonstration of the use of traps and other devices to collect, process, and submit mosquito samples to a laboratory for identification and testing. *For more information, contact Eric Fonken, Zoonosis Control Division, at (512) 458-7255 or e-mail eric.fonken@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Collaboration planned with law enforcement to aid victims of trafficking

Representatives of the Refugee Health Screening Program attended a conference Feb. 6-7 in Dallas on "victims of severe forms of trafficking," a term for people who have been taken forcibly or fraudulently from their homes and exploited to the extent of virtual

slavery in sweatshops or through “captive” indentured employment, such as prostitution. Called “VoTs,” they are a newly designated Refugee Program-eligible population. Their eligibility will require unique forms of intervention and interagency communication and collaboration, especially with several branches of law enforcement. Although VoTs are not eligible for full refugee services until certified as such by the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, they may well be at risk for health conditions of concern to public health, such as TB, STDs, HIV, or hepatitis. Law-enforcement entities, which will likely be the first to be aware of VoTs, need awareness of resources and guidance as to how to address these health issues and needs early on. Agencies such as the police, FBI, INS, Department of Justice, and attorneys general at various levels (local, state, district, regional, and national) will be made aware that the relevant public health programs (and refugee health programs) may be useful resources for them. Protocols for communication and coordination will be established; communication and coordination has already begun through the efforts of the Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs in the Texas Department of Human Services. For more information, contact Sam Householder, Refugee Health Screening Program, at (512) 458-7494 or e-mail sam.householder@tdh.state.tx.us.



African-American Advisory Work Group holds second meeting

The Bureau of HIV and STD Prevention convened the second meeting of the African-American Advisory Work Group on Jan. 10. The group’s role is to assist the bureau in responding to the recommendations in *HIV/AIDS: African American Perspectives and Recommendations for State and Local AIDS Directors and Health Departments*, a monograph created by the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors. At this second meeting, the group prioritized the implementing of specific recommendations in the monograph and made other recommendations. For more information, contact Felipe Rocha, HIV/STD Health Resources Division, at (512) 490-2505 or e-mail felipe.rocha@tdh.state.tx.us.



TB training planned, needs-assessment workshop held

Staff members of the TB Elimination Division met Jan. 23-24 with representatives of the Francis J. Curry National TB Center and members of the Technical Committee of Ten Against TB in El Paso to discuss plans for training to be offered to providers of TB services in the U.S.-Mexico border area. Staff from Region 9/10 participated in a local needs-assessment workshop sponsored by the Francis J. Curry National TB Center. For more information, contact Jose Moreira, TB Elimination Division, at (512) 458-7447 or e-mail jose.moreira@tdh.state.tx.us, or contact Miguel A. Escobedo, Region 9/10, at (915) 834-7680 or e-mail miguel.escobedo@tdh.state.tx.us.

Administration



TDH joins HHSC ‘e-Texas’ steering committee on further consolidations

TDH is participating in a steering committee at the Health and Human Services which is charged with preparing information for state leaders considering proposals to consolidate health and human service agencies. The state comptroller’s “e-Texas” recommendations include one such proposal which would reshape HHSC agencies from 24 into five; go to <http://www.cpa.state.tx.us/etexas2003/gg03.html> for more information about this recommendation. HHSC Commissioner Albert Hawkins asked the group to develop a

framework for implementing any consolidations the Legislature passes. Elaine Powell, director of the TDH Business Improvement Office, and Ben Delgado, deputy commissioner for Administration, serve on the steering committee, and other TDH staff members are serving on workgroups looking at client-services, administrative, or regulatory and enforcement issues. *For more information, contact Elaine Powell, Business Improvement Office, at (512) 458-7303 or e-mail elaine.powell@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Director selected for new Center for Health Statistics

Mike R. Gilliam Jr. has been selected as the director of the new TDH Center for Health Statistics, beginning his duties Feb. 3. He holds a master's degree in public health from the University of Pittsburgh and another master's in social work from the University of Oklahoma. He has served as a program coordinator for the Oklahoma Department of Health and most recently developed and managed a public health consulting practice. He has assisted public health organizations in Texas and several other states. Since 1995, he has provided technical assistance to community health coalitions, county health departments, and private health-care companies in utilizing health-related data. Mr. Gilliam has also worked under contract with the federal Health Resources and Services Administration to provide technical assistance to public health organizations in Texas, California, and Missouri. *For more information, contact Ben Delgado, Deputyship for Administration, at (512) 458-7432 or e-mail ben.delgado@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Training to target need to improve managerial skills and competencies

A new supervisory/management development program has been created in response to the Survey of Organizational Excellence results citing strong employee opinion on the need to improve the skills and competencies of TDH supervisors and managers. Initially, participation in the program will be required for supervisors with less than two years of TDH supervisory experience and those nominated to the program by their managers. Sometime in the future, when it becomes feasible, the program will become mandatory for all supervisors. Training will consist of two core components and a choice of at least one other component. The two required core components are:

- four specific half-day workshops which will include individual action plans at the end of each workshop (to be completed within one year) and two 90-minute discussion-group sessions per workshop as follow-up on lessons learned, and
- revisions to individual action plans (to be completed within two months of the workshops).

The elective will consist of participation in at least one of the following:

- computer-based training modules focusing on each of the workshop topics, with assessment at completion;
- selected readings based on each of the workshop topics, with updates to action plans;
- participation in a 12-month mentoring program with additional action plans addressing individual growth needs; or
- external management classes or other leadership opportunities with approval.

The program will be in operation by the end of May. *For more information, contact Wanda Thompson, Associateship for Operational Support, at (512) 458-7720 or e-mail wanda.thompson@tdh.state.tx.us.*



TDH prepared for upcoming implementation of new HIPAA privacy regulations

The implementation date for the federal HIPAA privacy regulations is April 14. To ensure compliance, TDH has developed administrative rules, policies, procedures, and training for employees. On April 14, TDH regional offices, clinics, the South Texas Health-Care System, and the Texas Center for Infectious Diseases will begin distributing a TDH HIPAA privacy notice to each direct-care client. The privacy notice, compliance plans, and other helpful links are available on the TDH HIPAA website at www.tdh.state.tx.us/hipaa. For more information, contact John Scott, Information Systems, at (512) 458- 7111, ext. 1-6170, or e-mail john.scott@tdh.state.tx.us.

Communications and Campaigns



Two news conference highlight TDH public health efforts

The Office of Communications arranged two news conferences this month in which Commissioner Sanchez addressed important issues of public health:

- On Feb. 13 in San Antonio, Dr. Sanchez spoke on the consequences for Texas if the current obesity trend continues. He was joined by three obesity experts who presented brief summaries on the national obesity problem, childhood obesity in Texas, and a plan for reversing the obesity trend in Texas. The news conference was held in conjunction with a two-day professional conference on promoting healthy weight.
- On Feb. 18 at TDH headquarters in Austin, the commissioner announced the start of Phase 1 of the state's plan to vaccinate certain public-health-system and hospital personnel against smallpox. The vaccinations are being conducted as a means to prepare for a possible bioterrorism event. For more information, contact Marsha Canright, Office of Communications, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-3201, or e-mail marsha.canright@tdh.state.tx.us.



'Who Died?' public-service announcement honored with 'Addy' award

The "Who Died?" public-service announcement for the "Worth It?" smoking-prevention campaign has been awarded an "Addy" award from the Houston Advertising Federation. Addy awards are extremely competitive, particularly in the public-service category. For more information, contact Philip Huang, Bureau of Chronic Disease and Tobacco Prevention, at (512) 458-7200, or e-mail philip.huang@tdh.state.tx.us.



Hepatitis C ads feature Tex-Mex musician Freddie Fender

In collaboration with the New Mexico Health Department, TDH began airing "at-risk" joint advertisements on Feb. 3 featuring Grammy winner Freddy Fender on English-language and Spanish-language radio and TV stations in El Paso. The ads urge persons at risk for hepatitis C to get tested and help stop the spread of hepatitis C. The ads will air until March 30. For more information, contact Gary Heseltine, Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance Division, at (512) 458-7676 or e-mail gary.heseltine@tdh.state.tx.us.



Hospital staffers trained on communicating during emergencies

The TDH Office of Communications, in collaboration with the Texas Hospital Association and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, provided training in "crisis emergency risk communication" Feb. 12-13 at the Texas Hospital Association's

headquarters in Austin. The training was conducted by Barbara Reynolds, M.A., crisis communication and emergency risk communication specialist at CDC. The course included understanding psychological factors, preparing for the first 48 hours, working with the media, roles and responsibilities, public health and media law, and developing skills essential for a spokesperson. The 100 participants included public health employees and about 70 hospital staffers who work in communications, marketing, and public relations. Office of Communications staff arranged for videotaping of the training and will offer it in a digitized format through both the Health Alert Network website and the Texas Hospital Association's website. *For more information, contact Andrea Littlefield, Office of Communications, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-2916, or e-mail andrea.littlefield@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Media contacts increase after Feb. 18 news conference on smallpox

During the month of January, the TDH Office of Communications received 72 media requests for information about the agency. Topics included proposed budget cuts, air drops of oral rabies vaccine, the Jan. 16 TDH hearing on eligibility for HIV medications, body piercing, mold, plague, bioterrorism funds, flu vaccinations, physician shortages, EMS, children with special health-care needs, and the smallpox-vaccination plan. Fifty media calls have come in so far this month; half concerned the smallpox news conference held on Feb. 18. Other February topics included meningitis, the flu, duct tape and plastic as civilian protection against bioterrorism, and the TDH budget in relation to both indigent health care and to HIV medications. *For more information, contact Marsha Canright, Office of Communications, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-3201, or e-mail marsha.canright@tdh.state.tx.us.*



March of Dimes kicks off Texas campaign about premature births

The March of Dimes kicked off its prematurity campaign in Texas on Feb. 18. Texas is part of a five-year, \$75 million national campaign by the March of Dimes to reduce the number of premature births (live births after 37 weeks of gestation, or earlier) and to raise awareness of prematurity and of the health and social problems associated with it. Surveys conducted by the national March of Dimes indicate that many people believe that preterm births are declining and are not aware of the consequences of a premature birth. Nationally, about 12 percent of live births are premature. At 14 percent, Texas' prematurity rate ranks among the highest in the nation. TDH staff serve on the state campaign's steering committee as well as on the March of Dimes subcommittee on education. *For more information, contact Margaret C. Méndez, Bureau of Women's Health, at (512) 458-7796 or e-mail margaret.mendez@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Radio broadcasters download and air TDH audio news releases

Radio broadcasters across the state downloaded TDH audio news releases from the TDH Office of Communications 4,865 times during the month of January. In addition, members of the public and others visited the website for audio news releases 616 times. Two audio news releases were produced in January, one on preventing violence and the other on Alzheimer's disease. In February, four have been produced; they offer radio listeners information on the Health Alert Network, obesity prevention, stopping smoking, and an update on smallpox vaccinations. *For more information, contact Andrea Morrow, Office of Communications, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-6586, or e-mail marsha.canright@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Two new videos support TDH's commitment to preventing obesity

In support of the TDH focus on fitness, WIC's Nutrition Education Section and the TDH Health Communications Division combined their technical and creative talents to produce two new videos, *A Healthy Body Suits Me!* and *Families: Moving Toward Fitness*. Both videos, which promote healthy eating and regular physical activity, will be shown to WIC participants in clinics across the state. They were designed to educate and motivate individuals and their families to adopt behaviors that will help them reach and maintain healthy weights. Produced in English and Spanish and closed-captioned for the hearing-impaired, the videos show viewers how being overweight can lead to health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and heart disease. They encourage families to increase physical activity, schedule regular meals together, and decrease the size of food portions. *For more information, contact Mary Van Eck, Bureau of Nutrition Services, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-3484, or e-mail mary.vaneck@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Program Updates



Promotoras conduct TB screenings in Laredo-area colonia

The City of Laredo Health Department TB Program and the Texas A&M Colonias Promotora Program are collaborating in El Cenizo, a colonia in the Laredo area, to enable promotoras to act as extensions of the TB elimination program. The promotoras conduct TB screening in addition to their regular activities, which include monthly food distribution, educational and promotional programs, and staffing the community's multi-purpose center. The project served about 350 families from August through December 2002. The promotoras' TB screenings yielded 39 persons with positive skin results and one with tuberculosis. Funding was provided by the TB Elimination Division through the City of Laredo Health Department. *For more information, contact Emmanuel Iroanya, TB Elimination Division, at (512) 458-7447 or e-mail emmanuel.iroanya@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Industry seeking TDH review of guidelines on quality of indoor air

Dr. Robert Bonham, former member of the Board of Health, is actively participating in mold-related issues with the building and construction industry, Texas Medical Association, legislators, and TDH. Industry, through Dr. Bonham, has asked TDH to informally review the "Indoor Air Quality Guidelines for Government Buildings" which were adopted by the Board of Health in December 2002. TDH has agreed to meet with industry representatives and physicians to review the current guidelines. Staff would bring any needed changes to the Board of Health at a future meeting. *For more information, contact Rick Bays, Consumer Health Protection, at (512) 458-7338 or e-mail richard.bays@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Hepatitis C Initiative presented at conference, and now has trademarked slogan

Staff epidemiologist Gary Heseltine conducted a plenary presentation Jan. 27-30 on the Texas Hepatitis C Initiative to hepatitis coordinators at the National Hepatitis Coordinators Conference in San Antonio. Staff also exhibited a booth at the conference. TDH has been granted registration with the U.S. Federal Trademark and Patent Office for its hepatitis C slogan/logo, "Don't Get Stuck With Hepatitis C." *For more information, contact Gary Heseltine, Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance Division, at (512) 458-7676 or e-mail gary.heseltine@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Accomplishments of ICES/TWICES team summarized

Over the past two months, the TWICES team has accomplished the following:

- Implemented Primary Health Care and Child Health modules on TWICES (Texas Wide Integrated Client Encounter System software) to our 17 “live” sites (current modules include Client Register, Immunizations, Vaccine Inventory and System Reports).
- Doubled the number of existing TWICES sites from 17 to 34 by bringing on Fort Bend (two clinics on Jan. 27), Brazoria (four clinics on Feb. 3, and El Paso (11 clinics on Feb. 10).
- Deployed the Maternal Health module on our test site so that we can get program and field testing and input before the module is placed on production.
- Began testing the interface between TWICES and PICS (Pharmacy Inventory Control System, currently being developed by Immunizations).

TWICES (a web-based, HIPAA-compliant application) is being written to replace ICES no later than October 2003. Both applications are used by clinics to track clients, record services, produce reports, and bill for services through the Centralized Billing System, which received submissions of almost \$9 million in claims from ICES and TWICES clinics in fiscal year 2002. *For more information, contact Bob Kissel, Bureau of Support Services, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-6410, or e-mail bob.kissel@tdh.state.tx.us.*



20,000 folic-acid starter kits to be distributed

The Texas Folic Acid Council, with support from the Perinatal Health Program in the TDH Bureau of Women’s Health, will distribute 20,000 folic-acid starter kits through women’s-health clinics in selected areas of Texas over the next few weeks. The starter kits are small cosmetics bags containing educational materials, a three-month supply of folic acid, and a promotional magnet. The kits also include an evaluation card that will be mailed back to TDH for tabulation. The card will evaluate the recipient’s knowledge about folic acid, plans regarding continued folic acid intake, and the effectiveness of the starter kits. The women’s-health clinics that have agreed to distribute the starter kits have also received folic-acid tool kits and educational videos for both staff and clients. The folic-acid starter kits are funded by a grant from the March of Dimes. *For more information, contact Chan McDermott, Bureau of Women’s Health, at (512) 458-7796 or e-mail chan.mcdermott@tdh.state.tx.us*



HRSA grant-funded hospital planning under way

As of mid-February, all 22 Trauma Service Areas have had initial meetings with their hospitals, and hospital planning groups have been formed. The regional plans for how the Health Resources and Services Administration dollars are to be spent within the regions have started to arrive and are being reviewed. The contracts for the Trauma Regional Advisory Councils have been mailed. Funds should start flowing to hospitals by the end of February. The guidance for Year 2 funding should arrive by March 15 with proposals being due back to HRSA by May 15. Funding for this portion should begin on Sept. 1. *For more information, contact Ron Hilliard, Bioterrorism Hospital Preparedness Program, at (512) 458-7219 or e-mail ron.hilliard@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Advisory council completes strategic plan for EMS, trauma system

“A Strategic Plan for the Texas EMS/Trauma System,” developed by the Governor’s EMS and Trauma Advisory Council (GETAC) has been finalized. Copies were mailed the legislative and state-leadership offices and will be sent to all key stakeholder groups. The document is also available on the Bureau of Emergency Management’s website at <http://www.tdh.state.tx.us/hcqs/ems/STRACPlan.pdf>. This plan was the culmination of about 18 months of work, which included stakeholder surveys, statewide public hearings, and public input at all GETAC meetings. GETAC members, who participated in a number of additional meetings, including a weekend retreat to evaluate the input received and to develop recommendations, are to be commended for their commitment to the completion of this enormous project. At its next meeting, GETAC will begin the process of implementing more than 60 strategies over the next four years. *For more information, contact Kathryn C. Perkins, Bureau of Emergency Management, at (512) 834-6700 or e-mail kathy.perkins@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Newborn Screening Laboratory working out of new lab building

In January, the Newborn Screening Laboratory analyzed more than 337,680 tests on about 67,536 newborn-screening specimens to provide results for the battery of five different disorders checked for in Texas newborns. The Newborn Screening Laboratory moved into the new lab building over the weekend of Jan. 10. Some instrumentation and analytical challenges have been encountered following the move, such as dirt tracked into the building which may be causing dust in the air that is affecting testing procedures. *For more information, contact Eldridge T. Hutcheson, Biochemistry and Genetics Division, at (512) 458-7430 or e-mail eldridge.hutcheson@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Pharmacy Inventory Control System being pilot-tested, implemented

Pilot testing of the Pharmacy Inventory Control System continued through the month of January. Training for Region 6 is scheduled for February 18. Implementation to Region 6 and to local health departments in Region 6 rolls out during the first week in March. A tentative yet aggressive schedule to travel to the other seven regions in March and April is in the planning stages. *For more information, contact Dinny Smith, Pharmacy Division, at (512) 458-7111, ext. 1-2494, or e-mail dinny.smith@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Texas Cancer Registry seeks to improve cancer registration

The Texas Cancer Registry is continuing to communicate with members of the Council of Health Institutions in TDH’s efforts to gain their support and identify the next steps for improving cancer registration in Texas. Members of the Texas Cancer Data Work Group also continue in their support of the Texas Cancer Registry and its improvement. A survey was developed to obtain information from pathology laboratories about their capacity for reporting cancer diagnoses electronically. This survey will serve as a pilot project as, per Senate Bill 285, physician reporting begins to be implemented. *For more information, contact Dr. Nancy Weiss, Texas Cancer Registry, at (512) 458-7523 or e-mail nancy.weiss@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Texas Vaccines for Children program aims to visit all 3,200 clinic sites

The Texas Vaccines for Children program is working closely with its quality-assurance contractor, the Texas Medical Foundation, to expand site visits statewide so that each of the 3,200 enrolled clinic sites will be visited by the end of 2003. Visits will include clinic assessments so that a physician can compare his or her clinic's immunization level to the National Immunization Survey data, the source for our statewide immunization levels.

For more information, contact Jack Sims, Immunization Division, Texas Vaccines for Children program, at (512) 458-7284 or e-mail jack.sims@tdh.state.tx.us.



Interagency Coordinating Council for HIV and Hepatitis approves annual report

The Interagency Coordinating Council for HIV and Hepatitis met on Dec. 20, 2002, and reviewed its final annual report, which is to be submitted to the Office of the Governor.

The Council approved the report as written. *For more information, contact Linda S. Moore, HIV/STD Clinical Resources Division, at (512) 490-2505 or e-mail linda.moore@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Texas cancer data submitted to National Program of Cancer Registries

The Texas Cancer Registry submitted a data file containing about a half million incident cancer cases from 1995 to 2001 to the National Program of Cancer Registries, a program of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The file was submitted in response to the NPCR's annual call-for-data and in fulfillment of grant-funding requirements. These data will be examined to determine if they are of sufficient completeness and quality to be included in the annual *United States Cancer Statistics* report. *For more information,*

contact Dr. Nancy Weiss, Texas Cancer Registry, at (512) 458-7523 or e-mail nancy.weiss@tdh.state.tx.us.



President's budget proposals could extend Texas vaccinations

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently released President Bush's proposals concerning immunizations. They include the following points:

- Public health departments would be allowed to vaccinate underinsured children with vaccine purchased with federal dollars. Now, underinsured children can be vaccinated through the federal Vaccines for Children program only when they present for services in federally qualified health centers or rural health clinics.
- The pneumococcal conjugate vaccine, PCV-7, would be allowed to be administered to underinsured children, ending the need to refer them to the federally qualified health centers or rural health clinics.
- Two tetanus/diphtheria vaccines would be restored to the federal Vaccines for Children program: the one for 6-year-olds and up, and the one for children younger than 7 for whom pertussis vaccine is contraindicated. Since 1998, there has been no federal contract for these vaccines because no manufacturer will bid due to the price ceiling established by law.
- A national stockpile of childhood vaccines would be established between 2003 and 2006 to ensure that national vaccine shortages do not recur. *For more information, contact Jack Sims, Immunization Division, Texas Vaccines for Children program, at (512) 458-7284 or e-mail jack.sims@tdh.state.tx.us.*



TB presentation given to Rotary International

Representatives from the Texas TB Coalition, Ten Against TB, and the City of Laredo Health Department attended a meeting on Feb. 8 of members from three districts of Rotary International and presented information about TB and what Rotary Clubs could do to assist in TB control and prevention activities. The meeting was held in Laredo. *For more information, contact Jose Moreira, TB Elimination Division, at (512) 458-7447 or e-mail jose.moreira@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Regional Updates

Public Health Region 1



Meetings in Lubbock and Canyon bring attention to indigent health care

The County Indigent Health-Care Program in Region 1 holds regional meetings at least three times a year to keep counties, hospital districts, and public hospitals up to date on program and policy changes and issues. These meetings are also used to educate the program's customers on other available resources in an effort to increase access to health care for indigent residents of their service areas. At the last meeting, speakers from the Texas Rehabilitation Commission and Social Security were asked to attend. A further refinement to the meeting pattern included having two regional meetings: one in Lubbock and one in Canyon, which allows more interested parties to attend. Speakers from the areas the meetings are held in are invited to make presentations, which has increased overall attendance at both meeting locations. *For more information, contact Claudia McQueen, County Indigent Health-Care Program, at (806) 767-0408 or e-mail claudia.mcqueen@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Zoonosis Control Program update draws concern on rabies vaccinations

In December, the Region 1 Zoonosis Control Program conducted an update on the West Nile virus and rabies in Pampa for local rabies-control authorities. Eleven people from eight counties attended, including five animal-shelter supervisors, the director of a local health department, a police officer, and three animal-control officers. Proposed changes in the rules on rabies control and shelter were discussed, with special interest shown in the proposed changes in rabies-vaccination frequency and the broadening of the shelter standards to include impoundment facilities in counties with a population smaller than 75,000. Most concern was expressed regarding the change in the rabies-vaccination frequency because of a perception that it will make verification of vaccination in bite cases more difficult and may result in more people forgetting to maintain vaccination currency. An overview of the onslaught of West Nile virus in the Panhandle and South Plains was also presented, with questions focusing on the level of activity expected in the coming year, the risk to humans and horses, and mosquito-reduction techniques. *For more information, contact Dr. James Alexander, Zoonosis Control Program, at (806) 655-7151 or e-mail james.alexander@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Public Health Region 4 and 5 North



New telecommunications network to improve delivery of rural health care

Regions 4/5 North has partnered with the University of Texas Health Center at Tyler in obtaining funding through the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund to develop a telecommunications network to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of health-care delivery in the predominately rural East Texas area. This technology will enhance the ability for Internet access and interactive televideo throughout the region. Region 4/5N identified five key clinic sites throughout the region, in addition to the regional office, for placement of this technology. Six of our 10 local health departments have also received the equipment. Connectivity should be completed by the end of February. The UT Health Center serves as the host campus to the Northeast Texas Consortium (NETnet), which currently services universities, colleges, public schools, hospitals, and other health-care facilities throughout East Texas. Access to a range of educational services through this mechanism will maximize effective health-care delivery in our rural environment. Also, public health and emergency communications will be enhanced with rapid two-way interactive televideo capacity, which will be available 24 hours a day. *For more information, contact Paul McGaha, Region 4/5N, at (903) 533-5264 or e-mail paul.mcgaha@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Public Health Region 6 and 5 South



Region 6/5S staff active in smallpox preparedness

Plans are moving forward for pre-event and post-event planning in Region 6/5S. Regional staff is working closely with local public health partners to coordinate activities, provide training, and share resources. A training session on smallpox-clinic logistics and protocols was held on Feb. 7; it was attended by 30 individuals from local public health departments. Topics in the training included clinic logistics, daily vaccination-site monitoring, surveillance, vaccine storage, and protocols for handling adverse events. Training for TDH staff and local health departments on vaccine administration was held Feb. 10-14. It focused on the technique for administering the vaccine as well as proper screening, site care, and adverse reactions. Regional staff is also actively involved in identifying potential locations and resources for a post-event scenario. *For more information, contact Brian Rutherford, Public Health Preparedness, at (713) 767-3010, or e-mail brian.rutherford@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Region 6/5S Radiation Control staff mark end of Superfund clean-up

The Region 6/5 South Radiation Control Program, working in conjunction with the TDH central office and the Environmental Protection Agency, completed a Superfund clean-up action at the Tavenor-Gulf Nuclear Site in Houston. A ceremony was held to mark the completion of the clean-up action on Dec. 13. Removal of a significant amount of contaminated soil, plumbing fixtures, debris, office and laboratory buildings, and

concrete pads was accomplished in the clean-up process. The TDH Bureau of Radiation Control has sampled and surveyed the property with EPA staff, and the property has been released for future unrestricted use. *For more information, contact Rex Mann, Regulatory Program, at (713) 767- 3250 or e-mail rex.mann@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Public Health Region 7



Round Rock's new smoke-free ordinance survives repeal attempt

The city of Round Rock's new smoke-free ordinance went into effect on Feb. 1 after months of presentations, deliberations, and citizen input. Employees from the TDH Bureau of Chronic Disease and Tobacco Prevention had provided testimony and information about smoking and secondhand smoke to the Round Rock city council. The TDH Office of Tobacco Prevention and Control and Williamson County and Cities Health District were on hand to present certificates of recognition to the City of Round Rock City Council and the Leader of the Youth and Adults for Safe Air Coalition. Petitioners had until Feb. 10 to collect enough signatures to repeal the recently passed smoking ordinance. Paid advertisements and publicity were not enough to collect the support they needed. The petition failed and the ordinance will remain intact. *For more information, contact Sylvia Barron, Office of Smoking and Health, at (254) 778-6744, ext. 2350, or e-mail sylvia.barron@tdh.state.tx.us*



Rash of school closings due to influenza-like illness

Twenty-one school districts in Region 7 have closed for one or more days due to influenza-like illness since Dec. 17. Sixteen of the closures occurred in the last 16 days of January. Closures have been the result of local school administrators' decisions made when absentee rates were close to or exceeded 20 percent of the students or staff. The epidemiology program in Region 7 initiated an investigation in a Robertson County school to clarify signs, symptoms, and possible etiology. A sample of students and their families affected by the illness was interviewed. Symptoms were consistent with influenza. Three of four laboratory specimens from four students were positive for influenza. Similar symptoms have been reported from the other schools within the region that have closed and those experiencing greater-than-normal absentee rates. *For more information, contact Russ Jones, Infectious Disease, at (254) 778-6744 or e-mail russ.jones@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Results of after-hours emergency drill reassuring

On the evening of Feb. 10, staff from the Region 7 Disease Control and Prevention Team participated in "Drill No. 2", an after-hours emergency-notification exercise. This drill involved all seven programs which comprise the team: Birth Defects Monitoring, EMS, Epidemiology Response Team, HIV/STD, Immunization, TB Elimination, and Zoonosis Control. The team leader activated the drill at 6:30 p.m., and the test message was relayed to all staff within 90 minutes. The drill determined which employees would have been able to report to Region 7 headquarters by 10 p.m. if this had been a real event. Almost all of the team members were reached. All who were reached could have reported to headquarters within the allotted time frame. The debriefing after the drill identified two

problems: Some employees' contact numbers were not operational the night of this unannounced drill, and the after-hours emergency reporting system experienced some technical problems. These problems are being corrected. This drill is the second drill designed to prepare staff to be activated after-hours in an emergency public health situation. The results were reassuring, and the staff seemed enthusiastic. Additional unannounced after-hours notification drills are planned on a quarterly basis. *For more information, contact Beverlee E. Nix, Zoonosis Control, at (254) 778-6744, ext. 2451, or e-mail beverlee.nix@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Community-screenings team uses effective and efficient command system

On Jan. 15, an outreach team of the Disease Prevention and Control Team, composed of staff from HIV/STD, TB, EMS, Immunizations and Public Health Nursing, conducted a targeted community screening in Marlin. The county has historically been an area of high morbidity from both STDs and TB, but current reporting activities show a decline in disease. The purpose of the screen was to determine if disease is present and not being detected or possibly reported, or if there has been a true decrease in disease. Primary high risks of the population targeted were identified as prostitution and substance abuse. The Disease Prevention and Control Team utilizes the Incident Command System to conduct community screenings and outbreak situations. The command system has proven to be an effective and efficient method and has increased the awareness of team roles in cross-functional activities. It has also afforded improved safety and better utilization of personnel, equipment, and time. *For more information, contact Jennifer Schneider, HIV/STD Program, (254) 778-6744 or e-mail jennifer.schneider@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Public Health Region 8



Local Public Health Leadership Forum held in San Antonio

Local Health Department staff, sanitarians, and nurses from across the region were present on Jan. 19 when Region 8 hosted the Local Public Health Leadership Forum in San Antonio. Topics of discussion included mosquito-control funds, the State Strategic Health Partnership, the Breast and Cervical Treatment Act, the Communicable Disease Reporting System, and demonstrations of and training on the retractable syringe. *For more information, contact Laurie Henefey, Immunizations Division, at (210) 949-2196 or e-mail laurie.henefey@tdh.state.tx.us.*



'Grass tops' forum discusses lessons learned from managed care

Region 8 staff participated in a "grass tops" community forum entitled "Shaping a Vision for America's 21st Century Health and Health Care," hosted by the Wye River Group on Health Care. Leaders in health and health care from across the state discussed the future shape of our health-care system, lessons learned from managed care, and the fundamental principles and values that should guide health policy. *For more information, contact Chip Riggings, Regional Director, at (210) 949-2003 or e-mail chip.riggings@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Residency graduates get board certification

The TDH General Preventive Medicine and Public Health Residency program was notified that the two recent graduates of our program have passed the specialty exam and are now board-certified in preventive medicine. Our program continues to realize success in preparation and placement of physicians in key public health positions across the state and country. *For more information, contact Chip Riggins, Regional Director, at (210) 949-2003 or e-mail chip.riggings@tdh.state.tx.us.*

Public Health Region 9 and 10



Epidemiology Response Team working on smallpox issues

The Epidemiology/Emergency program staff has conducted region-wide smallpox vaccination and prevention efforts. This has included training sessions for state and local public health staff and members of the medical community. *For more information, contact David Kolberson, Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance, at (915) 834-7778 or e-mail david.kolberson@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Big Bend area addressing shortage of medical providers

Miguel Escobedo, director of Region 9/10, met with community leaders from the Big Bend area to address the shortage of medical providers in border communities. The TDH regional office has been participating in a work group to help increase the number of medical providers in the Big Bend border area. *For more information, contact Miguel Escobedo, Region 9/10, at (915) 834-7680 or e-mail miguel.escobedo@tdh.state.tx.us.*



Clinic's designation discussed

On Feb. 13, Congressman Silvestre Reyes called a meeting of approximately 40 El Paso area stakeholders to discuss supporting R.E. Thomason Hospital's application for designation of its Thomason Cares clinics as federally qualified health centers. *For more information, contact Gale Morrow, Region 9/10, at (915) 834-7777 or e-mail gale.morrow@tdh.state.tx.us.*